Fairbury’s First Colorful Hotels

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Early Fairbury had two major hotels, the Livingston House and the Fairbury House. President Ulysses S. Grant stayed in one of these hotels on two occasions in 1871. One hotel was burned down as a victim of the East Side-West Side town feuds. The other hotel burned down after 35 years of operation in one of the most spectacular fires ever witnessed in the young city of Fairbury.

The history of these two hotels is closely tied to the early development of the town itself. Their rise and fall tell the story of fierce competition between rival factions, the coming of the railroads, and the rapid growth of a frontier community determined to become the leading town in central Illinois.

In the 1870s and 1880s, Fairbury had a major feud between the West Siders and the East Siders. The west side faction was led by John Marsh and his son Henry Marsh. The Marsh family came to Fairbury from Washington, Illinois, right about the time the city was founded in 1857. John Marsh dug 180 feet down and was the first person in central Illinois to discover coal. He created the Marsh Addition to Fairbury on the west side of town. He also donated a city block for a public park, now known as Marsh Park.

John and Henry Marsh's goal was to build the business district of the new town of Fairbury on the west side of town. They created the Arcade Block for businesses, which is near the location where the city water tower stands today. In 1866, John Marsh crowned the whole of his achievements by building the Livingston House hotel next to the railroad tracks and about a half block west of First Street.

The Livingston House was a large, two-story frame building located in what was then known as Central Park. Part of the lower floor was used as a depot and waiting room for railroad travelers. The building cost $17,000 to construct in 1866, which would be roughly $380,000 in today's dollars. It was known far and wide as the only hotel in central Illinois that had running water. In an era when most travelers relied on outdoor pumps and wash basins, indoor running water made the Livingston House one of the most modern hotels in the region.

Mr. Amsbary led the east side faction. His goal was to have the business district of the new town of Fairbury built on the east side of town. Mr. Amsbary and Mr. Marsh were bitter rivals, and they each tried to outdo the other in terms of new businesses for their side of town. Eventually, the followers of both sides began burning the buildings of the rival party.

Poor quality 1907 Blade newspaper photograph of the Thomas House was enhanced by ChatGPT AI (Artificial Intelligence) software.

According to Fairbury historian Alma Lewis James, there were so many suspicious fires in Fairbury during this period that many residents kept a change of clothing near their back door in case they had to run from their homes in the middle of the night. The town was growing rapidly, but it was also a place of intense competition and hard feelings between the two factions.

According to a July 1932 article in the Fairbury Blade, the year 1871 was an exciting one for Marsh's Livingston House hotel. In 1932, a ledger book from the Livingston House was discovered. In the hotel register book, President Ulysses S. Grant stayed for one night on Saturday, September 9, 1871. In a second entry on Tuesday, October 24, 1871, President Grant and his wife stayed one night at the Livingston House. They registered as U. S. Grant and Wife, Washington, D. C. The couple was assigned to Parlor B to spend the night.

The Grants may have stayed at the Livingston House in Fairbury because, in that era, it was considered one of the best hotels in central Illinois. The railroads' location also made Fairbury a convenient stopping point for travelers. The Chicago & Alton Railroad ran north and south through nearby Chenoa, about ten miles west of Fairbury. From Chenoa, passengers could connect to the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad, later known as the Toledo,

Peoria & Western Railroad, which ran east-west directly through Fairbury. Since Chenoa was a small town with limited accommodations, travelers often continued to Fairbury to spend the night at its well-known hotel.

The Peoria & Oquawka Railroad established Fairbury in 1857, running its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. Because the line ran east-west, the track location did not favor either of the feuding parties. But this all changed in 1872, when the Chicago & Paducah Railroad planned to install new tracks running north-south from Pontiac to Strawn.

John Marsh secretly met with the new railroad officials and convinced them to bring their tracks from Pontiac through Fairbury on the west side of town. When news of this decision spread, the East Enders were furious that the new railroad would strengthen the west side of town, and they quickly organized their own effort to influence the railroad company.

In the end, the East Enders managed to persuade the railroad officials to enter Fairbury on the west end, but then run their tracks east along the existing railroad line before turning south toward Strawn on the east side of town. Both factions claimed victory, and the rivalry between them continued for years.

To celebrate his success in securing railroad access to the east side, Mr. Amsbary built a hotel at the southwest corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets. The Carle Medical Clinic now occupies this location. The building was completed in 1872 and was named the Fairbury House. The hotel is clearly shown on the 1885 Sanborn Insurance map of Fairbury. Although only two poor-quality photographs of the building survive today, historical records confirm that it was a large and busy establishment.

For about ten years, there was stiff competition between Marsh's Livingston House and Amsbary's Fairbury House for customers traveling on the two railroads passing through Fairbury. At different times, each hotel also served as a temporary depot for passengers, since both buildings were located close to the railroad tracks.

At this time, the exact date on which the Livingston House burned down is unknown. However, several historical sources help narrow down the time period. In her Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars Fairbury history book, Alma Lewis James noted that the Livingston House was a victim of the Fairbury feuds. A biography of Ed Harlow, printed in the 1909 Santa Fe Employees' Magazine, states that he worked as a clerk at the Livingston House from 1874 to 1883. The 1885 Sanborn Insurance map of Fairbury shows that no hotel existed on the west side of town at that location. Since Mr. Harlow worked there until 1883, and the hotel was gone by 1885, the Livingston House must have burned sometime between those two dates. John Marsh never rebuilt the hotel after the fire.

After the Livingston House burned down, the Fairbury House became the only major hotel in Fairbury for many years. There are numerous mentions of the Fairbury House in

the Fairbury Blade newspaper archives. Weddings, public meetings, and social gatherings were often held at the hotel, making it an important center of community life.

The hotel changed ownership several times over the years. It was renamed the Thomas House in 1893, but it continued to serve travelers and residents. The building remained in business until 1907, when disaster struck once again.

In 1907, the hotel was destroyed in a spectacular fire that drew crowds of residents who watched helplessly as the flames consumed the large wooden structure. The Fairbury Blade published one photograph of the hotel before the fire, and another photograph showing the building engulfed in flames. That massive fire became one of the year's biggest events for Fairbury residents and marked the end of an important chapter in the town's early history.

The history of Fairbury's two main hotels between 1866 and 1907 is colorful. The older hotel, the Livingston House on the west side of town, was a large two-story frame building that also served as a depot and waiting room for travelers. It cost about $380,000 in today's dollars to build and was known far and wide as the only hotel in central Illinois with indoor running water. President Ulysses S. Grant stayed at the Livingston House twice in the fall of 1871, making it one of the most notable buildings in early Fairbury history.

After about 17 years of operation, the Livingston House succumbed to the East Side-West Side feuds and was burned to the ground sometime between 1883 and 1885.

The newer hotel, the Fairbury House, operated from 1872 to 1907, a total of 35 years. After the west side Livingston House burned down, it became the only major hotel in Fairbury, located along the railroad lines. The building also functioned as a community center, hosting weddings, meetings, and civic events for many years. Its destruction in the great fire of 1907 left a lasting impression on Fairbury residents and marked the end of the era of the town's first colorful hotels.